

## Religion Department Writing Plan 5/8/09

Writing is a crucial component of pedagogy in the critical and comparative study of religion that we do in our department. It is especially in writing that students have the most frequent and demanding opportunities to adopt and exercise a critical, academic stance toward religious traditions. By having our students pay particular attention to the careful construction of critical arguments, to the conventions of proper bibliographical documentation, and to distinguishing between “insider” and “outside observer” points of view, we teach them the means to analyze religions in a scholarly way. We also use our writing assignments to develop in our students the analytical skill to apply theoretical models to observable religious phenomena and texts, in particular, Ninian Smart’s six dimension model of religious worldviews as articulated in his book, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*.<sup>1</sup> Thus we require our students to write with this model in mind in both our introductory and capstone courses, Religion 102: Introduction to the Study of World Religions and Religion 401: Senior Seminar in Religion. Finally, in keeping with our conviction that to understand a religion one must try to imagine what it would be like to think within the framework of its worldview, in several of our course we encouraged students to compose works in the style and genres of particular religious traditions, for example, the “write your own midrash” and “write and preach your own Protestant style sermon” in Religion 204: Scripture in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, ever mindful of maintaining the line between “structured empathy” with and theological advocacy of the traditions we study, we use reflective writing assignments to require students to step outside of the experiences they have “tried on,” to try to think objectively about what they experienced (or didn’t). In our discussions with Lisa Lebduska, to prepare this statement, we noted that this is a writing strategy some of us would like to refine, since it does not always achieve what we expect it to. In any case, the Religion Department uses many different types of writing assignments to accomplish its goals. That being said, we do tend to emphasize certain kinds of assignments and goals more or less according to the level of our courses.

1. For 100-level courses, our writing assignments, especially in Rel 102, tend to emphasize 1) proper documentation of sources, 2) careful distinction between primary and secondary sources, and the student’s personal point of view, and 3) application of basic theories of religion to specific texts and data. We do not usually expect exhaustive research in these courses. Hence several of us assign a “mini-research paper” for Rel 102, in which we expect accurate documentation of a few primary and secondary sources. We have discussed with Writing Center faculty the potential for providing students with a workshop (perhaps in REL 102) to discuss the issues surrounding the use of sources. We have considered introducing students to Ref Works in 100 level courses after hearing from our students that doing so in 300 level courses or senior seminar was a bit too late. But the jury is still out on how valuable RefWorks is for our students.

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<sup>1</sup> Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations Of Human Beliefs*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2000).

We also considered heightening students' awareness of the issues surrounding plagiarism by having fuller discussion in class, including a discussion of the Tufts plagiarism-self test. See the "Quiz Yourself" portion of the website listed below <http://ase.tufts.edu/wts/student/plagiarism.asp>

Students might also be encouraged to cite one another (class comments, posts to discussion boards or blogs, etc.) to "authorize" them and to bring attention to the practice of knowledge-making conventions. These courses might also invite students to use what they learn in First Year Writing and/or to compare the types of literacies they develop in First Year Writing with the types of literacies they're developing in their entry-level religion courses.

2. We have tried to differentiate between the types of writing instruction and the types of writing expected at the 200 and 300-level courses. One suggestion was that the 200-level courses focused more on stylistic and argumentation conventions, whereas the 300-level courses focused more on research skills—finding, selecting and using research to discover, challenge, persuade.

3. We have a senior capstone writing project. Each senior is responsible for completing research or analytic paper on a topic which has been an ongoing interest for them as religion majors, and which draws upon the relevant theories of religion we cover in the Seminar. Students working on senior theses are encouraged to choose a topic that is related to, but beyond the scope of their thesis, i.e., addressing a theoretical issue, or a relevant tangent. We use the Dartmouth University guidelines for "Writing the Religion Paper" (<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/humanities/religion.shtml>) as a resource. Though Professor Timm usually teaches the Seminar, students will work with one of the three of us on this paper, and we have read the final papers and have even shared the responsibility of grading them. We've developed a rubric for this paper, which is appended to this statement.

We have discussed the possibility of having students write for a publication. The publication need not be a major scholarly journal—perhaps the Wire or undergraduate journal?

4. We've been actively encouraging qualified students to write senior honors theses, bringing up the possibility when they are juniors or earlier, so that they have the opportunity to do field work (often abroad) and preliminary research before they enroll in the thesis research course Rel 500 their senior year, and we carefully coordinate these projects with what they write on in Rel 401: Senior Seminar, as mentioned above.

## Religion 401 Senior Seminar Final Paper

Grade:

Your paper has been evaluated on the basis of four criteria: Proper documentation, content, organization, and style as follows

1. Proper Documentation (10%)
  - a. correct format for internal citations or footnotes
  - b. correct format for bibliographic citations
2. Content (60%)
  - a. Clear thesis
  - b. Concrete, specific supporting examples
  - c. Contextualization of your discussion
  - d. Do you explain and support why you think your point is important?
  - e. Do you use the most appropriate supporting sources?
  - f. Do you address the relevant counter-evidence or opposing positions?
  - g. Do you identify the most important methodological approaches for your topic (i.e., anthropological, comparative religious, social historical, psychological, evolutionary biological, art historical, literary, etc.)?
3. Organization (20%)
  - i. Introduction with thesis?
  - ii. Topic sentences with supporting examples in each paragraph in the body of your paper?
  - iii. Logical sequence of development of your argument?
  - iv. Conclusion?
4. Style (10%)
  - i. Do you use the right word choices?
  - ii. Do you use clear, grammatical, and non-contorted syntax? Active voice rather than passive voice sentence constructions are generally preferred, except in cases where you intentionally mean to be indefinite (as I do here ;-)).